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AUTHOR Boals, Beverly M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the effects of poverty on the children of the Lower Mississippi Delta area and summarizes the literature on the relationships between childhood poverty and children's education. Topics covered in the literature review include: (1) the effects of child poverty on educational achievement; (2) the effect of early education experiences on children in poverty; (3) the role of schools and society in responding to the needs of children in poverty; and (4) appropriate classroom environments and teaching techniques for children in poverty. The literature indicates that children and youth born into poverty develop attitudes of helplessness and defeat, and are more likely than their middle-class peers to fail in school. Recommendations regarding the role of teacher education institutions in assisting children in poverty are offered. These recommendations concern the need to increase the awareness of the needs of poor children on the part of undergraduate students majoring in teacher education programs, and the need to establish a curriculum that provides elementary and early childhood majors with the knowledge, tools, and skills needed to meet the challenges of working with children in poverty. The need to promote, provide, and obtain increased funding for early education programs for children in poverty is also noted. Contains 15 references. (SM)

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Children in Poverty:

Providing and Promoting a Quality Education

Beverly M. Boals
Professor and Chair
Department of Elementary Education
Arkansas State University
State University, Arkansas 72467

Carolyn L. Tyree
Assistant Professor
Department of Elementary Education
Arkansas State University
State University, Arkansas 72467

Rodney Barker
Kindergarten Teacher
Parkin Elementary School
Parkin, Arkansas 72373

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Abstract

The Lower Mississippi Delta area is comprised of 219 counties in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Tennessee and Kentucky. This is a region that, given the right tools and knowledge, can help the nation stitch a new balance of competitiveness in a global economy.

The purpose of this paper/presentation is to look at children living in the Delta and the issues associated with poverty. The presentation will focus on the effects of poverty on the child's academic success, and future alternatives which will involve the schools, Higher Education Teacher Education Institutions and the broader society. Some specific areas to be addressed include pre-school programs, school climate, teaching techniques, nutrition, affective needs--such as self-esteem--, and curricular needs. All those who work with these children (and people) of the Delta must have the proper knowledge, tools, and abilities needed to meet these challenges.

Poverty is a common denominator in the lives of many young children today. According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1980 Ed., p. 894), poverty is defined as a lack of money or material possessions. Since our first declaration of war against poverty in 1965, nearly one-fifth of our youngest citizens still grow up poor and deprived of safe and adequate housing, social services, and educational assistance (Reed & Sauter, 1990). In 1986, children under six constituted the U.S. age group with the greatest percentage of members living in poverty-- 22 percent as compared to a 14 percent overall rate and a 12 percent rate for people aged 65 and older (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988). Data collected for the 1987 U. S. Census Bureau Report (Reed & Sautter, 1990) showed that over two of every five black and Hispanic children under six were poor. The younger a child is today, the greater are his or her chances of being poor. Although many of these children are too young to understand poverty, they are forced to deal with it (Reed & Sautter, 1990).

In a report by the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (1990) data figures compiled by the Southern Regional Education Board, reveal that all five of their member states (who are also Delta states: Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas) have 20% or more of their school age

population in poverty. Coupling that figure with national statistics which show that less than 17% of all children in poverty are served by the proven H.S. program, is quite enlightening and startling for educators and concerned members of our society.

This Lower Mississippi Delta area is comprised of 219 counties in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Tennessee and Kentucky. The Delta can be described as a dwelling in the heart of the nation, where people thrive, or in some cases, barely survive, along its great living artery, the Mississippi river. These are people, who by virtue of place, are surrounded by thousands of square miles of some of the country's richest natural resources and physical assets and who have used their sense of place to develop a cultural and historical heritage that is rich and unique. And yet, these are the people who by statistics constitute the poorest region of the U.S. (Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission Report (1990). Despite the hardships, these are people who prefer hope to despair. This is a region that, given the right tools and knowledge, can help the nation, as a whole, stitch a new balance of competitiveness in a global economy. This is a land where the right actions can spell a new day.

The purpose of this article is to look at children living in the Delta and issues associated with poverty. However, many of the characteristics we see in Delta children will correlate with children living in other poverty stricken areas. When thinking and writing about the Delta, one needs to focus on the following issues: (1) The poverty of children of the Delta; (2) The effects of poverty on the child's academic success or cognitive development; (3) The effect quality early educational experiences have upon children in poverty; (4) The role of schools and society in response to the needs of children in poverty; (5) The classroom environment and the appropriate teaching techniques to be used with children in poverty; (6) The role of Higher Education Teacher Education Institutions in assisting children in poverty; and (7) Future alternatives for promoting a quality education for the children of the Delta.

Effects of Child Poverty on Educational Achievement

Child poverty has a tremendous impact on educational achievement and cognitive advancement. Children from impoverished backgrounds are more likely than their middle class peers to fail in school. Spicker and Davis (1987) in a recent article entitled "The Rural Gifted Child," reviewed Michael and Dodson's (1978) research which identified some characteristics of children from

impoverished backgrounds. Among these characteristics are: (1) a deficiency in language skills; (2) a lack of perceptual skill development in language differentiation; (3) a lack of stimulation for responding to questions or asking questions; (4) a lack of curiosity, due to a lack of objects in the home; (5) a lack of enriching experiences; (6) a lack of concern over school attendance; (7) a lack of support by parents of the learning establishment; and, (8) a lack of parental understanding of the education process (Michael and Dobson, 1978).

Chaikin (1985) in a U. S. Department of Education Study reviewed some effects poverty has upon children's educational progress. One factor reviewed was years in poverty. According to the study there is a significant probability that a child living in poverty seven or more years will perform below his or her expected age or grade level. Also, children who spend years in poverty, will as adolescents, tend to drop out of school in greater numbers than those with fewer years in poverty (Chaikin, 1985).

According to (Kaufman, 1987) "whenever poverty exists, it is pervasive and punitive." The accepted conclusion is that poverty negatively affects the quality of the home environment, which in turn has a major impact on educational achievement (Rios, 1987).

Effect of Early Education Experiences on Children in Poverty

A review of the literature conducted by Haskins (1989) for the Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, looked at the impact quality preschool programs can have on poor children's intellectual and social competence. Virtually all the studies reviewed focused their attention on poor and minority children.

Longitudinal studies (Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce & Snipper, 1982; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986) concluded that the values derived from participation in early education programs occur in four areas and are numerous: (1) Evidence indicates that model preschool programs have positive effects on life success measures such as teen pregnancy, delinquency, welfare use, and employment. In 1985 taxpayers spent about $16.6 billion on Federal programs that support children born to teen parents (Burt, 1986), and nearly 1.3 million children between the ages of 10 and 17, including 1 in 10 young men, go through the judicial process each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986, p. 171). Of the children participating in this study, by age 19 only 31% of those who attended early education programs had been arrested or detained compared with 51% of the children who had not attended a preschool program. Quality preschool programs can impact this

problem. (2) Studies show that model preschool programs can produce long-term benefits that exceed the value of the original program investment. One 20-year national follow-up study estimated that the economic savings equaled seven times the cost of one year of preschool (Barnett, 1985). (3) Preschool programs have immediate positive impact on tests of intellectual performance and social competence; (4) There is evidence of improvement on long-term measures of school performance demonstrated by a reduction in special education placement, and a reduction in grade retention as a result of attendance in preschool programs (Lazar et al, 1982)

This research (Barnett, 1985) clearly shows that quality preschool programs for poor children produce large benefits that in the long run will more than repay the public's investment. Through the findings of Barnett (1985) one dollar invested in preschool education will save $5.73 in subsequent spending on special education, public assistance, and crime.

What Schools and Society Can Do

Today, it is recognized that effective education and economic development must go hand in hand. To protect itself, society must pursue sound economic and educational research and development. "Authors Knapp and Shields (1990) suggest that schools re-think

and restructure the following areas: (1) Maximization of time on task; (2) Establishment of high expectations for academic learning; and, (3) Development of a school climate that strengthens the involvement of parents in support of instruction. Knapp and Shields (1990) clearly emphasize the role of the schools in adapting instruction to children's backgrounds at the same time children begin to adapt to school standards and procedures. Progress is possible if schools are willing to look at whom they are teaching, what they are teaching and how it is being taught.

Appropriate Teaching Techniques

When considering the concept of what and how to teach the disadvantaged and/or at-risk children, an appropriate curriculum emphasizes "the basics" (Knapp and Shields, 1990). Many educators have low expectations of these students and do not set realistic standards or prepare a proper foundation for future academic success. When educators prejudge these children, they offset what the child can actually do well with what he cannot do. According to Knapp & Shields (1990) accepted strategies for teaching children of poverty include homogenous grouping, teacher directed instruction which allows teacher to structure learning experiences, maintain an appropriate pace, and maintain order.

Alternative approaches which encourage increases in student directed, co-operative learning include: (1) the use of teacher/student and student-student discussion; (2) use of team learning experiences; (3) use of modeling, demonstration, and explanations; (4) variation of instructional arrangements, and, (5) maintaining a classroom order to reflect the nature of the academic task at hand. Translating these concepts and principles into specific tasks, may be a long process. Experimental investigations with researchers must provide data and information in order to extend our understanding of "what works" for children in poverty.

(Focus on Exceptional Children). The Present and The Future: What Can Be Done?

Dealing with factors that contribute to child poverty is a national problem. The lack of jobs that pay a decent wage is the biggest contributor to poverty in small towns, cities, and suburbs. Only by the implementation of a comprehensive economic policy that gives top priority to the creation of better-paying job, can we more successfully deal with this crisis. Also, educators worry that, as the number of children in poverty grow, education for those children--without sharp increases in funding--can only get worse (Reed & Sautter, 1990).

At-risk students face increased deficiencies in the major areas of life--hunger, health and self-esteem. It is difficult to attend and learn when you are hungry. Lacking in appropriate accommodations and poor nutrition contribute to serious health problems. In a nation which often rewards cuter qualities, such as designer clothes and accumulation of material possessions, self-esteem is severely diminished for these children.

One of the most profound consequences of living in poverty for a child the effect of having a short-term value system or of living only for the immediate. Growing up in an extremely low-economic family situation instills in children a dim outlook for the future. Children, in poverty, deal with immediate concerns on a daily survival level. They and their caretakers are rarely motivated to deal with long-range educational plans. Often low-income families are large, and often one parent is solely responsible for the family's food, clothing, and shelter. Most often the public schools are expected to overcome economic and social inequalities and attempt to do so without adequate resources to confront these problems (Reed & Sauter, 1990). Across the nation, educators are continually trying to devise and implement creative ideas and methods in response to this national concern. The answer lies in researchers and practitioners co-

operatively documenting in experimental investigations what is possible in working with the children of poverty (Reed & Sauter, 1990).

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Since World War II there has been increased legislation dealing with economic issues for the elderly and according to many child advocates the same can be done for children. The dedication and persistence of early childhood advocates to address this issue and inform decision makers is evident, but much work lies ahead. In the last 15 years, poverty among children has increased and become complicated which has severe ramifications for our children, schools, our economy, and society.

Children and youth born into poverty develop attitudes of helplessness and defeat. A child who lacks nutritious food, a satisfactory dwelling place, or stimulation experiences cannot be expected to focus fully on academics. The future of a vast number of children is certain to remain bleak and hopeless unless society meets this challenge.

What Teacher-Education Institutions Can Do

In this article, the authors have attempted to look at several issues; child poverty; the children of the Delta; the effect of poverty on educational achievement; the effect early

education programs can have on children in poverty; and, the appropriate teaching techniques and curriculum for children who live in poverty. As teacher-education institutions, we can use this information to establish and work toward the accomplishment of several goals: (1) One goal should be to promote and increase awareness of the need for early education programs and to make people aware of their values and benefits; (2) A second goal is to promote and to provide early education programs for children in poverty as well as for all children and to obtain increased funding for these programs; (3) Another goal is to increase awareness of the needs of children in poverty among teacher education programs' undergraduate majors; (4) As professionals in the fields of early childhood and elementary education, we need to ensure that all preschool and elementary programs are quality programs--infancy through the primary grades--that adhere to the guidelines established by our professional organizations, such as NAEYC; (5) And a fifth goal is to establish in our teacher education programs a curriculum which will provide our majors--elementary and early childhood--with the proper knowledge, tools, and abilities needed to meet the challenges of working with children in poverty.

All children deserve a chance at success. It is our responsibility to do all that we can to see that they have this chance. If we, teachers and society, are to succeed, the children must succeed.

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